THE KING OF FOXES

Fur Farming on the Fox Ranches of Prince Edward Island

By J. A. STEVENSON

THE little Canadian province of Prince Edward Island is known as the Garden of the Dominion. Nestling in the sheltered conclave formed by the southern coast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and protected from the Atlantic by the Cape Breton promontory and Newfoundland, its quiet is never seriously ruffled by ocean storms. Continually bathed by ozone-laden sea air its climate knows neither extreme heat nor cold and is pleasant, healthy and invigorating. Its summers are delightfully cool and its winters are enjoyable and bracing without discomfort.

Possessing no large mountains or forests and lying low in the gulf, it gives a promise of monotony to the approaching visitor. But closer investigation sweeps away this impression. Clumps of trees, lovely groves, undulating hills covered with the greenest of grass, rich meadows, fat corn lands, abundant flocks and comfortable farmhouses, churches and villages give it an appearance of well-being and prosperity. It is 130 miles in length and its width varies from two to 30 miles while its area is 2,184 square miles with a population of about 93,000.

It is cultivated from end to end, ninety per cent of its whole area being classed as "possible farm land." The chief industry is agriculture and the well-kept farms and good buildings testify to the fertility of the soil and the skill of its cultivators. There is no specialization in its field agriculture but the favorite lines are dairying, stock raising and gardening of vegetables and fruit.

Prince Edward Island has the distinction of being the only province of Canada which produces sufficient food for its own requirements. Not only does it achieve this but the value of the surplus product exported is more than sufficient to pay for all its other purchases.

Fish abound in the bays and rivers of the island and around its shores and the annual value of the catch is put at two and three-quarter million dollars. The famous Malpeque oyster which in late years has been threatened with extinction is found on the coast and the lobster industry employs about 5,000 persons. Poverty is practically unknown on the island and there is a minimum of crime; the jails rarely have many occupants. While there are some Irish on the island the main racial ingredients are Highland Scotch and French-Canadian, and the island has acquired a reputation for sending forth both to Canada and the United States more than an ordinary proportion of able men, including Franklin K. Lane, lately Secretary of the Interior, and President Schurman, of Cornell.

Young Black Fox

Critics have, however, accused Prince Edward Island of being a hopeless backwater where enterprise was unknown and energy an unnecessary quality but the charge has been belied in a most convincing way by the success with which the islanders have organized a very novel and profitable industry. They have brought scientific fur farming to a greater pitch of perfection than any other community on the globe. As far as industries go it may be reckoned young. In a way it dates back as far as 1887, but it is only in the last decade that it has become one of the staple activities to obtain general recognition. Just as the diamond is peerless among precious stones so the fur of the silver fox holds an assured preeminence among furs. The description, silver fox, is decidedly misleading, for it is the trade name for the skin of the black fox, the term silver being derived from the presence of glistening white and gray hairs among the black jet. The brush to be perfect should have a tip of pure white. On account of the luster and richness of the fur it is always fashionable in the feminine world and the demand is unlimited. But twenty years ago it looked as if this fur would soon be so scarce as to be beyond the purses of all save a favored few. Such survivors of the silver fox tribe as were left had retreated to the fastnesses of the Arctic North and the Hudson Bay Company had fixed a standard price of $1,000 for a prime pelt. In 1912 a single first-class skin brought $1,400.

In the eighties the rarity of this fur had set the mind of a trapper, Charlie Dalton, now Sir Charles Dalton and a native of Prince Edward Island, thinking. He had been a hunter ever since he was a boy and his earliest recollections concerned the setting of a trap. He foresaw the day when the silver fox would be practically impossible to secure and conceived the notion of bringing scientific knowledge and industrial organization to bear upon the problem and raising foxes upon an intensive system as if they were goats or rabbits. The more he digested the idea the more he became convinced of its feasibility. He realized that trappers, who had obtained litters of young black fox cubs and had tried to rear them, had usually failed, but he attributed their failure to lack of knowledge and proper environment. So he set himself to study the habits of the tribe and to this end acquired a collection of ordinary red foxes whose habits and needs he closely studied for some years. About 1890 he learned that a trapper friend on Anticosti Island across the gulf had two pairs of silver foxes in captivity. He bought them and installed them in special quarters which he had prepared on his farm at Tignish.

Young Red Fox

Meanwhile, it happened that another trapper called Robert Doulton had been reasoning in a similar strain and had begun preliminary studies with some silver gray animals. One day Dalton, having heard of Doulton's experiment, paid the latter a visit and was allowed to see his animals. There ensued a prolonged discussion of the problem involved, the prospects of the industry, and the best methods to pursue. The result was a decision to pool their resources and form a partnership for the commercial farming of the silver fox. They set up a large wire pen on Savage Island where Doulton had his ranch and commenced scientific breeding in good earnest. The original two pairs of silver foxes bought by Dalton produced four pups, which were successfully reared and it was proved that given congenial conditions the silver fox could be domesticated successfully.

The stock thus established was reinforced by a pair of young foxes found in a den and successfully dug out. The firm soon found themselves in possession of a considerable number of foxes and able to kill some of the older ones for their pelts, which found a profitable disposal. Neighbors who had jeered at this "shiftless fooling with wild foxes" became keenly interested in the new enterprise. Others began to embark in fox farming operations and met with gratifying success. The inevitable result followed, a boom in fox farming developed, and people who had not the remotest connection with trapping or the fur business began to start ranches. Expansion went on rapidly, especially when fox furs from the island began to realize large prices on the London market. The pioneers of the industry found themselves besieged with applications to buy pups and the demand for stock caused a virtual cessation of pelt production for the time being. Companies were floated to embark on the business and there was heavy speculation in their shares in the years preceding the war.

Full Black Fox

In 1912 there were 277 fox ranches on the island, of which 143 belonged to companies. The total value of their stock was then estimated at $10,000,000, twenty-five per cent in excess of the value of all the other live stock held by the island farmers. At that time $20,000 was not an uncommon price to pay for a pair of first-rate pups and in one case the high-water mark of $35,000 was reached. The profits on one small farm capitalized at $10,000 enabled a dividend of 500 per cent to be distributed one year. But the inflation of values was too great and the boom could not last. It had begun to collapse before the war and its outbreak, closing as it speedily did the European market for furs, hastened the end. A great deal of money was lost but the effect has been to put the industry in a healthy condition. While high prices are still obtainable for a pair of good breeders the industry is now on a pelt basis and, under good management, is extremely remunerative.

Contrary to early opinion the silver fox has not proved difficult to domesticate and farm. The chief requisites are patience, shrewdness and sympathy with the animal, coupled with the knack of noting its peculiarities and humoring them. The human factor plays a very large part in success. The average ranch contains from one to five acres and as far as possible the natural environment of the fox is reproduced. The favorite location is in a piece of thinned bush where mixed hard and soft woods will both shade from the summer heat and allow an early thaw of snow and ice and whose elevation permits good drainage. As the fox is extremely sensitive to noise, the farm should be removed as far as possible from roads and houses. The ranch is usually enclosed by a double wall of board and wire netting with the inner wall some distance from the outer boundary. The latter is designed to keep out disturbing intruders and also to prevent the escape of stray foxes who may get out of their pens. The inner space is divided into pens, and there is a double wall of wire between each. The best-sized pen for a single male measures 20 by 50 feet and 40 by 50 feet is considered necessary for a breeding pen. Between each row of pens there is a path eight feet wide with doors opening into each pen. The wire netting must be at least ten feet high while on the one hand, it is sunk deep into the ground to defeat burrowing and on the other is bent over at right angles for a foot at least to prevent climbing or jumping over. Inside the pen is a small wooden kennel, 8 by 10 feet, provided with a ridge roof, entrance to which is through a wooden tunnel. The house is divided into two compartments each 4 feet by 8. It is lined with cork, chips, chaff or similar material.

The average fox has a life of from 11 to 15 years and it is not uncommon for a rancher to start with a pair of pups costing perhaps $10,000 and find himself at the end of four years with a dozen pairs and an annual output of 40 pelts. As the young grow up, the older animals are killed so that there is no real depreciation. The chief food consists of horseflesh, tripe, coarse fish, and so on, which would otherwise be wasted and it is supplemented by biscuits, bread, vegetables, oatmeal, berries and eggs. A special fox biscuit factory has been started to cater for the industry. The general practice is to feed twice a day at regular hours.

The external organization of the industry has steadily gone ahead. The leading fox

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